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ABSTRACT

The origins of modern English teaching can be found in the Uniform Lists provided by eastern colleges, beginning in 1874, for college entrance examinations. The study of literature was informed by the arguments of Matthew Arnold, who maintained that the purpose of literature study was initiation into, and maintenance of, "high culture"--the best thoughts and words of western civilization. This idea corresponds closely with recent calls for a "cultural literacy" based on the reading of specific great works of literature or, in some cases, just being aware of great literature. The founding of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1911 marked a movement toward "functional" reading, or reading for "real life." The purpose of such an approach is still "cultural literacy" but it is a somewhat more democratic notion of culture. One aspect of this argument went beyond social maintenance and into social reconstruction--the attempt to educate the populace to improve society. The psycholinguistic and language experience approaches acknowledge the cultural and societal aspects of schooling and reading, but emphases are on the linguistic experience of the reader, the development of communicative competence, and the holistic understanding of texts, rather than on a skills approach. A hybrid of these approaches might be appropriate for the literature curriculum in a secondary school, but each approach has a different purpose, which must be understood to be effectively implemented and evaluated. A three-page bibliography concludes the document. (SRT)

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Approaches to the Secondary School Literature Curriculum

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Introduction:

Much attention has been given to the content of the secondary school curriculum recently, especially since "A Nation at Risk" was released in 1983 (Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, April 26, 1983). In the area of English teaching, the issue of content has raised questions about the teaching of literature in the schools, both its purpose and its function. As schools move toward curriculum reform (or merely change), either by state or community mandate or through their own initiative, the current structure of the literature curriculum is certain to change, for better or for worse.

The following is an attempt to present an overview of the competing visions of the literature curriculum currently being advanced, and to present the historical roots of the approaches and the assumptions about learning and adolescents that each approach makes. It is hoped that such an overview might put the debate over the literature curriculum into a larger perspective than "Should Julius Caesar be taught in the 9th or 10th grade?", and provide some guidelines for the readjustment of the literature curriculum in the secondary school.

Each of the four successive approaches discussed overlaps historically the one that has gone before; the categories are not

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discreet. Some of the people mentioned have lived long enough to fit under two categories, or have "intuited" approaches under one rationale and modified the rationale later when new research changed our perspective.

1) High Culture Model (Past Culture)

History:

The origins of modern English teaching are to be found in the Uniform Lists provided by eastern colleges, beginning in 1874, for college entrance examinations. (The College Entrance Examination Board assumed these lists after 1900.) The lists consisted of suggested titles for college preparatory reading which college-bound students might profitably study in preparation for entrance to these colleges (see Applebee, Tradition and Reform, p. 49 - 51). The lists consisted of adult classics which most of us might still recognize. (See Applebee, T&R p. 275-277, for the titles from 1874-1900. Milton, Eliot, Byron, Cooper, Hawthorne, Eliot, Pope, and Longfellow, are all represented.)

The study of literature at that time was informed by the arguments of Matthew Arnold on the function and purpose of literature study, and Arnold maintained that the avowed purpose of literature study was initiation into, and maintenance of, "high culture," representing the best thoughts and words of western civilization. The rationale, as provided in the classic Culture and Anarchy (1867), was that in the new world, less informed by the old morality of religion, a new ethic could only be forged from the great thoughts of the western world, centering

especially on the ancient Greeks. As the title Culture and Anarchy suggests, civilization itself was as stake.

The reform movement in literary studies getting the most attention at the present time is certainly a Neo-Arnoldian view of literature study. The point of view, expressed most eloquently by E.D. Hirsch in a frequently cited article in American Scholar (Spring 1983), and endorsed enthusiastically by the Secretary of Education, William Bennett, calls for a "cultural literacy," based on the reading of specific great works of literature, or in some cases just being aware of great literature (Hirsch, EJ, October, 1985, 47-49).

Educational Aims:

The cultural literacy view presents an approach to curriculum which is relatively simple, but which is difficult to teach to all students. As for the curriculum, all one needs is an anthology, arranged by types or chronology, or a list of suggested pre-college reading, such as the one put out by the New England Association of Teachers of English (3rd. ed., 1981). Students learn a received "common culture." To most advocates of such an approach, normally college professors of humanities, methodology is a moot point, so the issue of method is left to the secondary school teacher. (See The Humanities in Precollegiate Education, NSSE, 1984, for evidence that this is still the case.) Again, as suggested by Matthew Arnold, the morality of western civilization is at stake. The rationale from a psychological point of view is non-existent, except for a vague form of mental discipline, and the general educational argument is a moral one

based on the liberal arts ideal (e.g.. "Education Secretary Backs Teaching of Religious Values," NYT, 11/12/85).

Also similarly to the Arnold argument, this position is one that subordinates individual needs and interests to the greater needs of society. The argument is not a "bad" argument, but it does have clear assumptions. Other strong proponents of this view include Robert Maynard Hutchins of University of Chicago and "Great Books" fame in the 1920s and 1930s and Hutchins' colleague in those days, Mortimer Adler. Adler's Padeia Proposal assumes the same tenets, which he has promoted before through the "Great Books" programs.

Evaluation:

Evaluation in this model would involve a standardized demonstration of literary knowledge and understanding.

2) Democratic Culture Model (Culture for All; Present Culture)

History:

The founding of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1911 was a natural outgrowth of a movement to free English teaching from the domination of the College Entrance Examinations and College Reading lists (Applebee, p. 51 and Hook, Long Way, pp. 11-15). NCTE's position, further defined by the development of the comprehensive high school during WWI, was not too far from the Arnoldian position in terms of curriculum decision making; that is, the decision was one of appropriate texts for educating youth for a place in society. The difference lay in the "progressive" philosophy inherent in NCTE's membership and the

movement toward "functional" reading, or reading for a "real-life" purpose.

High culture was deemed to be unnecessary for every level of society (though Dewey thought that "high culture," as such, was valueless for all segments of society, [Applebee, p. 48]), and the non-college-bound were placed in situations where they would read books more appropriate to their calling in life, and encouraged to develop interests in reading for pleasure. Curricular decisions were based on "needs" assessments for the various social classes.

Educational Aims:

NCTE still supports this position, and still produces the wide-ranging suggested reading bibliographies, Books for You, and Your Reading. These books are usually arranged by student interests, and mix fiction with non-fiction. The purpose of the book lists, and their format reflects this, is to encourage wide reading in the adolescent's areas of interest while simultaneously encouraging reading of some literary merit, even if it isn't an adult classic. (Though the NCTE classroom practices volume for 1984, Literature -- News That Stays News: Fresh Approaches to the Classics, would seem to indicate that NCTE has never abandoned the adult classics as suitable content for the literature curriculum.)

The educational position is that of developing experience, primarily vicarious life experience. Early forms of language experience were also implicit in the original educational philosophy, and language experience is certainly part of the current rationale. The purpose of

such an approach is still "cultural literacy" but it is a somewhat more democratic notion of culture.

Evaluation:

Evaluation in this model would involve charting the type and amount of reading students engaged in, and the standardized testing element would generally involve basic general and literary reading skills. Literary knowledge which was considered "relevant" would also be part of the testable knowledge.

3) Social Development / Social Reconstruction Model (Future Culture)

History:

One aspect of the democratic literacy argument was one that went beyond social maintenance and into social reconstruction. One stream of NCTE thinking was in this vein, promoted especially by those in the membership who were also affiliated with the Progressive Education Association. This social reconstruction argument changes following WWII into a social development argument, but maintains its essential features; the attempt to educate the populace to improve society whether by producing a more skilled labor force or a psychologically better-adjusted labor force. In both cases, the purpose of the literature curriculm changes from an emphasis on books to an emphasis on the adolescent.

Louise Rosenblatt's Literature as Exploration, written under the sponsorship of the PEA and published in 1938, is a clear statement of the social reconstruction goals of literature study. (Rosenblatt's

later development of her work, The Reader, the Text, and the Poem, probably fits under the next category: the psycholinguistic / language experience approach.) The NCTE-sponsored "experience curriculum" of the 1930s, bibliotherapy from the forties, values clarification in the sixties and seventies, and young adult books dealing with adolescent problems from the fifties to the present all stem from this curricular tradition.

Educational Aims:

The emphasis in the selection of texts under the social reconstruction and social development model is the appropriateness of the book for the social and developmental needs of the reader. Daniel Fader and Elton McNeil's Hooked on Books (1968), an individualized reading program, was first used with youthful offenders in a Michigan correction facility, in hopes of reforming their anti-literacy attitudes or their illiteracy. David Bleich's subjective criticism and Louise Rosenblatt's transactional criticism both come out of this tradition, but they also overlap into the language experience category to be discussed next.

The teacher's role in the social development model is to assist in the selection of individual texts based on the personal needs of the reader (or allowing the reader to seek his own books), and the English teacher may also serve a therapeutic role by trying to match the reader's interests or problems with a text which addresses the same issue. Total individualization is the ideal of such an approach, with the common culture coming from shared experience.

Evaluation:

Evaluation in this model is very difficult, since one would need to assume an increased awareness of societal justice or an increased self-awareness on the part of the adolescent as the criteria for success. The supreme evaluation of this model is in an improved society, and a reduction in crime statistics might be taken as a positive vote for the approach. The improvement of general reading skills is usually part of the evaluation of this approach.

4) Psycholinguistic / Language Experience Model (Cognitive-developmental Perspective)

History:

The roots of the psycholinguistic and language experience approaches are in developmental reading, and the emphasis is on the development of literacy, in both a general manner and in a subject-specific manner. The "response to literature" approach is also part of this tradition. Though the cultural and societal aspects of schooling and reading are acknowledged, the emphasis is on the linguistic experience of the reader and the development of communicative competence.

Both the response to literature and psycholinguistic approaches, dating mainly from the sixties, are different than traditional developmental reading approaches in that they emphasize holistic understanding of texts, rather than a skills approach. The work of Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith represents some of the standard

knowledge in the field as it relates to reading; Alan Purves' and James Squire's work in response to literature are also in the tradition.

Educational Aims:

Under such an approach, the teacher's responsibility is to create a reading environment which fosters personal and aesthetic response to the text. The approach is student-centered like the social development approach, but the emphasis is on the cognitive and the linguistic facets of reading rather than the affective and the societal. The teacher's role is to foster linguistic understanding, and the selection of texts would be based on providing a wide variety of types and genres of literature, as well as different linguistic forms for students, while simultaneously encouraging wide-ranging voluntary selection of reading materials.

Evaluation:

Evaluation under the language experience model would be based on improvement of the student's linguistic and literary understanding over time, as evidenced by increased skill in reading, wider variety in the selection of voluntary reading, and more sophistication in literary response. Criterion-referenced evaluation would be essential under such a model.

Implications for Curriculum Development:

In changing, or reforming, curriculum, those doing the changing must be guided by consistent principles, especially if they wish to have

a curriculum which can be held accountable or evaluated appropriately. This is not to stay that every curriculum should be single-minded, but that emphases or streams of the literature curriculum should be carefully structured and defined, and evaluated in a manner appropriate to the approach and its goals.

One might profitably suggest a hybrid of the aforementioned approaches as appropriate for the literature curriculum in a secondary school, but each approach has a different purpose which must be understood so as to be effectively implemented and evaluated. An effective language experience or response-centered literature curriculum would need more than adult classics for texts; and standardized testing to evaluate a social development or social reconstruction literature curriculum would be ludicrous at best.

Understanding of the goals and philosophy of a curricular approach is also essential for the implementation of the program because it affects methodology. The teacher-centered approaches implicit (and explicit) in the high culture model are certainly inappropriate for a classroom which espouses a philosophy of language experience and personal response.

In the end, change in the literature curriculum is more than buying a few new titles for the book room, or moving Julius Caesar to the 9th grade. New approaches to the curriculum imply new attitudes about our students and new rationales for the study and teaching of literature. Those who are promoting a change in the current curriculum, such as the Secretary of Education, are clear about their agenda; English teachers who are not clear about what they espouse will end up following, or be forced to follow, the leads of those who are certain.

Or worse, end up teaching for goals which are not attainable through the texts used and the methods espoused.

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